KOREA: THE DECISION TO INVADE THE NORTH

LTC Jim Stefan
NWC USA
26 October 1989

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
26 OCT 1989		**-**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Korea: The Decision to Invade the North	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**10**	

"Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrafices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration . Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."

- Clausewitz

Introduction

This paper attempts to provide a critical analysis of the United States' decision, during the Korean Conflict, to invade North Korea. The focal point of this analysis will revolve around Clausewitz's theory of war, in particular, his thoughts on the crucial relationships between political objectives, military objectives and military strategy. The major theses of this essay can be summarized as follows:

1) The United States entered the Korean conflict with reasonably clear political objectives in mind;

2) These political objectives were limited in nature;

3) The initial military objectives and strategy devised to achieve those objectives were sound and worked;

4) During the course of the conflict, the United States allowed its military strategy to change its political objectives, resulting in an escalation of the war in direct opposition to United States policy desires.

US/UN Political Objectives at the Outset of Conflict

When the United States and its United Nations' Allies decided to respond militarily to North Korea's attack upon South Korea (ROK) in June of 1950, their initial political objectives were outlined in the Security Council resolution recommending UN action. Specifically, the Council asked UN members to "furnish assistance to the ROK as may be deemed necessary to repel armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area". The first of these objectives, repelling North Korean aggression, seemed rather clear. The second objective, "restoring peace and security" was a somewhat more ambiguous concept, open to a number of interpretations as to what must be done. The United States, however, as the leader and prime mover in the UN effort, had a fairly clear grasp of what the objectives should be in Korea.

From the outset of the conflict, United States policy makers insisted on placing Korea in proper perspective. That perspective viewed Korea to be of limited importance in the greater scheme of world affairs, which was increasingly dominated by deteriorating East-West relations. While Korea became a symbol of open communist aggression, which the United States viewed as requiring a response from the Free World, that response had to be limited. In addition, it had to detract as little as possible from the United States' efforts to bolster European defenses against the "real" threat, the Soviet Union. In short, America's first priority in June of 1950 was to build up the strength of the

newly formed NATO in Western Europe. The dilemma for the United States, therefore, was how to keep its primary focus on Europe, while at the same time responding to a communist challenge at the other end of the world. The answer for policy makers in Washington was to limit the conflict in Korea as much as possible. The political objectives in Korea therefore were initially themselves limited. They were to repel the North Korean forces and reestablish the status quo ante bellum. Certainly, the unification of Korea was desireable, but this was not a clear political objective at the outset of hostilities.

Initial US/UN Military Strategy

The initial military strategy devised to accomplish the above political objectives was literally born in the heat of battle and out of necessity. Even before the UN recommemded assistance to the ROK, President Truman had authorized MacArthur, his commander in the Far East, to employ United States naval and air forces to support the crumbling ROK Army. This set the stage for subsequent American leadership in all key decision-making with respect to the war, to include the early commitment of American ground forces.

The first military objective of this early stage of the war was to retain a significant foothold on the Korean peninsula to allow for the arrival of reinforcements. This was accomplished at a great cost to ROK and early-committed United States forces, who traded space for time. Having

succeeded in establishing a viable defensive foothold along the Pusan Perimeter, the US/UN strategy was to reinforce its ground forces as quickly as possible and counterattack the North Koreans. The clear objective of this next stage of the war was the destruction of the North Korean forces in the south. Indeed, this was the precise objective of MacArthur's audacious Inchon operation, conducted on 15 September, only 80 days after the conflict had begun.

Analysis of Early Policy, Objectives and Strategy

In retrospect, it would appear that American conduct of the war prior to the Inchon landing and the decision to invade the North, successfully incorporated a number of the concepts, ideas and theories of two preeminent military thinkers, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. To begin with, the crucial relationships between policy and its political objectives and the accompanying military objectives and strategy, which were at the heart of Clausewitz's theory of war, were right and proper during the early stages of the conflict. United States policy was to limit the war in Korea. The political objectives of early American involvement were to repel North Korean aggression and reestablish the ROK. Given the military situation on the ground (early North Korean successes far south), the subsequent military objective of destroying North Korean forces in the South was a logical extension of United States

policy. Up until the decision to invade North Korea, the military strategy to accomplish that objective worked well.

Clausewitz would have applauded this effort in two regards. First, he would have appreciated the subordination of military strategy as an instrument of policy, even in this war of limited political objectives; for Clausewitz clearly understood that limited war was very likely, if the political objective demanded it. Second, he would heartily concur with the focus of the United States' military objective, i.e. the destruction of the North Korean forces.

In addition to the above concepts in Clausewitz's theories, the early stages of the Korean conflict reflect two aspects of Sun Tzu's military thought. The first was to avoid prolonged conflict whenever possible. The United States was clearly attempting to do this in Korea. Quick defeat of the North Koreans and reestablishment of the ROK would allow the United States to focus on its primary concern in the world, i.e. Europe and the establishment of NATO. Secondly, Sun Tzu wrote extensively on the need for deception in war. No doubt the Inchon operation proved to be a master stroke in this regard.

Given the early success of US/UN operations in Korea, we must now turn our attention to subsequent events and decisions to see what went wrong.

Decision to Invade North Korea

Having discussed the overarching policy concerns of the United States and its limited political objectives in Korea, we must now ask ourselves how and why the United States initiated the first escalation of the war, thus contradicting its own limited policy objectives. Interestingly, the decision to conduct military operations north of the 38th Parallel (with some caveats) was actually made before the success of the Inchon operation. In August and early September of 1950, MacArthur discussed the issue with the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Chief of Naval Operations in Tokyo. All agreed that MacArthur's ultimate military objective was destruction of North Korean forces and that ground operations beyond the Parallel should be conducted as necessary to achieve that goal. This agreement was subsequently discussed by the NSC and approved by the President on 11 September 1950, 4 days before Inchon. Relayed back to MacArthur in the form of a JCS directive, this paper authorized him to conduct operations north of the Parallel to destroy North Korean forces and, if there was no indication of threat of entry of Soviet or Chinese elements in force, to make plans for occupation of North Korea. No ground operations were to take place north of the Parallel in the event of Soviet or Chinese entry.

After the success of the Inchon operation and the breakout of the Pusan Perimeter, the UN (prompted by the US) implicitly sanctioned the military strategy of crossing the Parallel. In addition, on 9 October 1950, the restriction

on MacArthur with respect to the Chinese threat was removed. The President and the JCS told him he could move north even if the Chinese intervened if, in his judgment, there was a reasonable chance of success.

There are a number of possible explanations as to why the United States risked expansion of the war in September and October of 1950. To begin with, there were cogent military reasons for crossing the 38th Parallel. After Inchon and the Pusan breakout, the North Korean forces were broken, but not totally destroyed. The military situation argued for moving across the Parallel to finish off North Korean forces and thus not allowing them to regroup and rearm. In addition, the euphoria of military success may have taken hold, as policy makers saw the opportunity to achieve a long-term UN objective of uniting Korea. Certainly policy makers considered the danger of Soviet/Chinese intervention, as evidenced by their caveats on MacArthur's operations; but their fears apparently were outweighed by a desire to end the conflict with a more complete political victory. Public opinion at home may also have affected the decision. The war in Korea lacked a great deal of public support and perhaps policy makers felt compelled to achieve something more than the status quo ante bellum in light of the sacrafices that had been made. Whatever the reasons for the decision to invade North Korea, the fact remains that this decision and the subsequent political objective of unifying Korea significantly altered

the war aims of the United States and would greatly affect the United States' ability to limit the scope of the war.

The reader is well aware of the events which followed operations north of the 38th Parallel. We need not recount the details of Chinese intervention, followed by the bloody ebb and flow of the second invasion of South Korea and two years of stalemate before the armistice. What is important for us to analyze, however, are the ramifications of the decision to invade the North and what lessons on the art of war we can possibly learn from this experience.

Ramifications of the Decision to Invade the North

As we have already noted, the decision to invade North Korea was based primarily on military considerations. Except for the short-lived caveat on Soviet/Chinese intervention, the larger policy implications of this decision were either ignored or the risks inherent in the strategy were not properly assessed. In crossing the 38th Parallel, the United States had altered its political objectives in the war. Clausewitz would have noted nothing inherently wrong with the latter, for he had opined that "... the original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences". The problem for the United States in Korea, however, was that the probable consequences of this change were not adequately considered. In addition, the crucial

relationships between political and military objectives and military strategy became skewed. After Inchon, it appeared as if military strategy began to dictate policy objectives and not vice versa. In a way, the war took on a life of its own. In the process, the larger United States policy objective of limiting the war was thereby undermined.

No doubt, serious intelligence failures compounded the poor risk assessment involved in the American escalation of the war. Sun Tzu certainly would have taken the United States to task for a failure to "Know the enemy". But perhaps the most critical lesson to be learned from this experience is that, if we believe that war is an instrument of policy, then it must follow that military strategy and the conduct of war must be supportive of and subservient to war's political objectives. As hard as American policy makers tried to limit the scope of the war in Korea, they nevertheless allowed the execution of military strategy to undermine their major policy goal.